

# *Sketch*

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## Show Boat

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# SHOW BOAT

By Esther Brucklacher, '39

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*Folk See "Ten Nights in a  
Bar Room."*

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WITH a long hoarse toot, the last coal barge of the day cleared its fog-choked throat as it passed, ploughing out diagonal wave-troughs to slap the shore.

The *Edwina*, uncertain ferry boat, spluttered across the Kanawha with a determined "putt, putt . . . putt." A new sign with big letters against the greasy engine room announced to the pallid moonlight: "Free Trip Across with Show Boat Ticket." The whap-slap of the churning back wheel paused, flinging off some final dabs of sudsy foam, and stopped. We coasted into shore, and braced our feet for the thud of the lowered end platform as it jammed into the thick mud of the bank. A heavy chain rumbled over plank, and the ferry was moored. "Watch your step," and we scrambled up the bank, miring our white shoes in the soft earth.

We followed a path along the high bank, around a sharp bend, to Billy Bryant's "floating palace," a great white ark, long and gleaming. People were crossing the plank to the deck, two by two, and filing past a white-haired old patriarch in a ticket booth who counted them in, while deck bells signaled gay haste.

Inside: soggy river smell like wet, mouldy rope; whiffs of peanuts; popcorn with rancid butter; earthy shoes; warm, unwashed bodies sitting too close; home-cured "terbakker" being smoked and "chawed"; and too close behind us the sickening stench of breath, heavy with "shine likker." Heavy boots pounded the rhythm of impatient waiting. Thick hands

clapped stickily. Above this rumble the high soprano of excited children's voices piped over men's heavy guffaws and the steady clacking of women's tongues.

**L**IGHTS down! Silence. A baby wailed thinly. Silence again. The show was on! It was "Ten Nights in a Bar Room." The dark heads and shoulders rising out of the seats in front leaned ahead, the better to see and hear.

At the end of act one, a great sigh heaved out of the crowd with the let-down of between-act buffoonery.

The audience tensed again, as the play resumed. Women recognized the too familiar symbol of poverty on the stage back-drop, where fallen plaster exposed bone-white ribs of lath surrounded with the grimy skin of old brown wall-paper.

Throaty coughs and sniffles came, unashamed, in the last scene when the salvaged derelict of a husband, reformed, forgiven, and decently clad, tenderly embraced his patient wife. It was over too soon!

"Billy Bryant's floating palace'll be here agin next year, folks."

Jarred back into themselves, the crowd flowed into the aisles and trickled silently down the gang plank.

## The Western Desert

By Alice Hughes, '36

**G**REEN and grey cactus on brown sand,  
White sand dazzling by day,  
And at evening  
Fading into faint red and pale yellow.  
Scattered haciendas,  
Havens of rest and water.  
Lone cowboys by night  
Riding in the cool breeze  
Among grotesque shadows of the desert,  
Under the starlit sky,  
Hunting lost cattle in the sage brush.